

Tale One: Bran's Tale

by Michael J. Allen

The Brown Kite crested across mild seas. At her bow, Bran Reardon, youngest and favorite son of twelve children, stared at the far off coast as it passed their port side. A frown bent his features, handsome by the most discriminating tastes, to merely attractive.

“I’ve got to get the hell off of this ship,” he muttered to himself.

After months and months at sea this trip and dozens of trips before that, the merest whiff of sea air made his stomach churn. He shook his head and spun from the bow. Bran marched across the deck heading for his cabin.

“Captain?” said the man at the helm.

“Yes, Bertram?” Bran said without looking up.

“The men were wondering. We’ll make Haven by morning, any chance of a few days in port or has Lord Reardon scheduled more business?”

He met Bertram’s eye, “The Kite won’t be going back to sea any time soon.”

“That was nice of his lordship.”

Bran chuckled, “No, it’s my decision. One I’ll likely pay for since it’ll make us late for our next destination.”

“I’m sure the men would understand,” Bertram said.

“They might, but I won’t have it.”

Bran slammed open his cabin door and hurried inside. He strode across the spacious room to large cabinet on the port side. Swinging open the doors, he selected a bottle of port and uncorked it with his teeth. He drew a long draught and then threw himself into his chair. The bottle took turns tilted to his lips and weathering his stares. In the end, its service was ended with a shatter.

A clamor drew him out of his stupor. He rushed to the deck.

“Captain, sail on our starboard aft quarter,” Bertram said.

Bran took the stairs three at a time and snatched the eyeglass from Bertram. Through the magnification he saw a sleek ship flying midnight blue sails but no flag.

“Well I’ll be damned,” Bran said.

“Should we arm for a fight, Captain?” the quartermaster asked.

“No, Ethan, they’re no threat to us. Part of Raven’s flock unless he’s masquerading.”

Men crowded to the rail to get a look. Murmurs ran through the crew.

“You think it likely?” Ethan asked.

“Not if he wants to stay afloat. Raven’s not one to cross,” Bran said.

Bertram beamed, “One of Raven’s, eh? That alone makes this trip worth it.”

Bran raised the glass back to his eye. The ship closed until her captain was certain of the Kite’s identity and then turned back to the open ocean.

Dawn rose, splitting Haven between light and dark as the Kite neared it. Bran watched it draw closer. His gaze traced the slow rise of its terraced levels. The city was composed of a series of concentric walled circles. On previous visits he had seen most of them. The lowest encompassed the cities poor and its warehouses. The harbor lay just outside this wall.

The first terrace, second circle, was known as the merchant ring. Bran recalled many a pleasant tavern and wench within its walls. Within the merchant ring rose two other terraces. The first was oblong and touched upon by all of the city’s rings. It was the temple district. The temple district was packed with temples and priests dedicated to every god Bran had ever heard of. Both priest and temple lived in uneasy communion with their neighbors as the poor and royal alike worshipped as they would. He remembered the extra donation required to enter the temple district, split amongst all of the temples so as not to offend even one god.

The second terrace, which rose above all the others, sat just north of the temple district and crowned Haven. This was the golden circle, home to the rich, the royal gardens, and the King’s

Castle. Only a single tavern lay within the golden circle walls, the King's Galleon. Bran seldom visited the Galleon, preferring to carouse with his crew, but the Galleon was run by one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen on sea or sand, Ezmerelda Lore.

In his reverie, Bran ignored the activity around him. His crew knew their jobs and did not require him to bark orders. They sailed the Kite into Haven with seasoned ease and left him to his memories until they tied up.

"Captain?" Bertram said.

"Excellent, Bertram," Bran said, "I'll take care of the harbormaster. See that the ship is secure and then let the men go ashore."

"What of the," Bertram hesitated, "package?"

"I'll see to that as well," Bran said.

"How long will we be in port?"

"Two weeks at the very least. See to it everyone is caught up on their pay. If we stay longer we might pay them some advance as well."

Bertram grinned, "It'll be a pleasure."

Bran rushed to his cabin. He crossed to a safe and unlocked it. He removed a small ornate chest about the size of melon. Tucking it under his arm, he departed the ship. He stopped at the end of the dock and stared up at the Brown Kite.

Moments later he was across the docks and entered the harbormaster's office. The room was full of people queued up to enter Haven. Bran paused at the door, not to wait in the queue but to examine a woman in the line. She was elven and from the look of it fragile as porcelain. Raven hair was shot through with silver that somehow struck him as foreign. She felt his gaze and met it. Bran was overwhelmed by a piercing stare harder than iron.

He flashed his most charming grin. It had no affect. Shrugging, he bypassed the queue and sidled up to the harbor master. A murmur rose behind him. He turned and flashed the grin again. It quieted at once.

“There is a queue you know, Mister—”

“Yes, of course, know all about it, Jerome,” He dropped several small pouches as he spoke, “Here’s the berthing tax for the Brown Kite, the tax for her crew, the tax for entry into the city and enough for a gold pass. Hurry up man, time is money.”

Jerome gaped.

Bran snatched a piece of gold parchment from a pile on the desk, turned and left. The crowd watched him depart, a mixed group of the jealous and the awestruck.

Bran headed back to the Kite and waylaid Bertram on its gangplank. He handed the pass over, “Only the best for my first mate.”

“Thanks, see you at the tavern later?”

Bran flashed a grin, “Not if all goes well.”

Bertram laughed and shook his head. He watched Bran go. Bran sauntered across the harbor to the gates of the first circle.

The guards at the gate were garbed in black studded leather with swords hung from orange sashes draped across their torsos. The elf woman was there speaking to them with a heavy accent.

Bran strolled by them through the gate.

“Halt, there,” the guard said, grabbing Bran’s arm.

Bran turned around and fixed him with his eyes. A grin spread across his face as he brushed the guard’s hand away, “Now, my good man, it is all well and good to have a job to do, but a smart fellow like you should have the wit to know when he’s out of line.”

“As I was explaining to the lady, you have to pay a tax to enter Haven,” the guard said.

“What’s your name?” Bran asked.

“Devon, sir.”

“Devon, look at your uniform. It’s wrinkled and dusty; your boots are dull, no shine at all. Surely, you’re a hard working fellow. Now, look at this lady, a fine flower if I do say so myself. Do you think her common riff raff that you should be stopping her thus?” Bran asked.

“Well, I uh—”

“Now look at me.”

Devon obeyed.

“Good lad, now putting to use that considerable wit the gods have given you. Do you really think you should be stopping either of us?”

“Oh, uh—”

Bran took the woman’s hand. She jerked back from his touch, taking her hand with her. He eased forward and led her by the barest tips of her fingers, “This way, my lady.”

Bran led her through the gate and down the avenue. The guard blinked a few times and then called after Bran, “A pleasure to make your acquaintance, my Lord.”

When they were out of sight of the gate, Bran inclined his head to her, “Good day, lady.”

He turned to stride off.

“That’s it?” she asked.

“Is what it?” Bran asked.

“You get me through the gate without so much as paying and you don’t want anything in return?” she asked.

A smile consumed his face, “On the contrary, Lady. I would very much appreciate it if you would have a good day.”

With a flourish and bow, he continued down the avenue. He left her to stand dumbstruck in the street.